

The Wise Counsel of Jethro

Exodus 18:1-27

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I'd like to invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 18. Israel is now all but at the mountain. Last week we came to the final stage on Israel's road to Mt. Sinai as she makes her way through the wilderness to this encounter to God at the Mountain of the Lord. You'll remember that there have been four crises on the way. There was the lack of water at Marah, then followed by a lack of food, then there was another lack of water experienced at Rephidem, then finally there was an attack by a desert tribe. And we emphasized over and over that they were real crises, there was nothing petty about what Israel was going through. This was not sort of unjustified grumbling that Israel has been tempted to. They were very justified to be concerned. They were not appropriate in the way that they failed to express faith in God, but the circumstances were serious. In the midst of those four crises, there was the further test of Exodus 16 with regard to their obedience to God's command and the gathering of the manna in terms of the Lord's day, or the Sabbath Day. So, in each of these things, we have seen Israel's faith tested.

Over and over the book of Exodus has emphasized that Israel has been saved, she has been redeemed out of Egypt, in order to worship. But God doesn't want people who are simply going to go through rituals that offer external, liturgical, ceremonies to Him, He wants people who are changed from the inside out. They are to worship Him with all of their lives, especially through faith and obedience. He desires a people who trust in Him for deliverance and redemption and salvation, and in response to that redemption and salvation, He wants a people who will obey Him. So, the old hymn, *Trust and Obey*, again gives a sort of summary of the things that God desires from the children of Israel as they prepare to worship Him through Sinai.

Now, this passage that we are going to study is very different from the passages that precede it and the passages that will follow it. It serves as a transition. It reminds us, on the one hand, of a Gentile, Nomadic desert tribe that did not respond to Israel and to Israel's God, like Amalek did. On the other hand, it prepares us for the giving of God's law. So, let's take our Bibles in hand and turn to God's holy and inspired word in Exodus chapter 18.

Now, Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that

God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Moses' wife Zipporah, after he had sent her away, and her two sons, of whom one was named Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land." And the other was named Eliezer, for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was camped, at the mount of God. And he sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her." Then Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare, and went into the tent. And Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had befallen them on the journey, and how the LORD had delivered them. And Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the LORD had done to Israel, in delivering them from the hand to the Egyptians. So Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians." Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses' father-in-law before God. And it came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening. Now when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" And Moses said to the father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. "When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and make known the statutes of God and His laws." And Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good, You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me: I shall give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk, and the work they are to do. "Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them, as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this things and God so commands you , then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place

in peace." So Moses listened to his father-in-law, and did all that he had said. And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. And they judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses but every minor dispute they themselves would judge. Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way into his own land. Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, this is Your word. Teach us by it this night. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now this is a strange passage before you. Perhaps one of the things you ask is, "Why would the Lord have recorded such things for us? What do we have to learn from it?" Well, let me say to begin, that the passage falls into two parts. You'll see in verses 1 through 12, this encounter between Moses and his father-in-law and within that encounter it self, you'll see two parts. First of all, there is this family reunion that is described in verses 1 through 7, then in verses 8 through 12 there is this family conversation which is filled with spiritual discussion about what God has done for Moses and for the people of Israel. That's the first part of the chapter.

Then from verses 13 to 27 in the second part of the chapter, you see this story about the appointment of judges and the establishment of the judicial system. What could God possibly be teaching us in this? Well, there are two or three things I'd like you to see tonight. First of all Moses is teaching us here about the faithfulness of God. You'll see that in verses 1 through 7. Secondly, we are seeing here an example of Gentiles making a confession of the redemption of the Lord. Finally we're seeing here a system established for the efficient administration of justice in Israel in verses 13 through 27. As we see that, God not only desires to teach and announce His word and law to Israel, but He means to see it effected and implemented and practically upheld in the land through this judicial system. Let's look at this passage together tonight.

I. Remembering all that God has done for us-God's faithfulness.

First let's turn to verses 1 through 7. There we see the family reunion. Then in verses 8 through 12, we see a spiritual conversation and in verses 13 through 27 we see an appointment of judges. So, the family reunion here in verses 1 through 7. This passage gives us an account of the reuniting of Moses' family and it highlights the significance of his sons' names along with several other phrases which point to the faithfulness of God. This is a time of reflection for Moses. Moses has made his way back to the Mountain of Sinai. You remember the last time that Moses was here? You have to go all the way back to Exodus chapter 3. The last time that Moses was at this mountain he was a shepherd. He was taking

care of sheep and he met God at the burning bush. Now he's shepherding a nation. That very realization must have impressed upon Moses how awesome God has been in His faithfulness to His promises. Moses didn't want to go to Egypt the last time he was at Sinai. Now, he's been there and come back again. Now, he has already gone through the fire and he's brought the people of God to the mountain of God and certainly Moses is here remembering all that God had done for him and for Israel as he writes down this account. He tells us, notice in verse 1, that even Jethro, this Midianite priest who was his father-in-law, had heard of all that God had done for him and for Israel in delivering them out of Egypt.

Now, there are many particular aspects of this first section that I would love to dwell on, but let me say just a couple of things about this passage. First of all, this passage provides for us a beautiful testimony to the historical accuracy of the Bible and of Moses' writings in particular. This passage introduces a couple of problems that no one who was attempting to fake a historical record would ever have entered into the record that they were desiring to fake. For one thing, this passage tells us that Moses' family had been with Jethro, his father-in-law. Whereas, all the way back in Exodus chapter 4 verse 20, we are told Moses' family had accompanied him to Egypt. Then we're never told anything else about them, so this passage is letting us know that somewhere along the way, Moses had sent his family back to Midian to be with his father-in-law. Now you never would have interjected that kind of a problem into an account that you're attempting to fake. Secondly, this account records for us the name of the second son of Moses, of whom we have never heard before, and of whom we are never going to hear again. Once again in ancient literature, you didn't interject meaningless data in order to make the account seem more realistic. That is a whole modern literary phenomenon. It never happens in ancient literature. So, in the mention of the son of Moses, Eliezer, and in the mention of this previously unmentioned sending back of Moses' family to Midian while he was in Egypt, we see an example of how Moses is faithfully recounting what actually happened, because you never would have said it otherwise. It would have raised too many questions in peoples' minds, as it often does. In fact I received a phone call from a member of the church about a week ago who had been reading ahead in Exodus wanting to see what came next and he said, "Wait a minute, Exodus 4 said Moses' family was with him in Egypt. Now we see Jethro bringing them back to him at the mountain. What happened?" That's precisely the question that would come into your mind, and if you were attempting to fabricate this historic account, you would never have raised that in the minds of the people of God. So, what we see here actually is a testimony of the complete accuracy of the historical account. It is in evidence of the historicity of the passage.

What I want to emphasize is this: there are four or five things just in verses 1 through 7 which emphasize God's faithfulness. Notice verse 1, which recounts for us Jethro hearing about one, all that God had done for Moses in Israel; and two, how God had brought them out of Egypt; then notice the name Gershom. The

name of Moses' son, Gershom, is repeated. Moses pauses and says, "I named him Gershom because I was a sojourner," and it reminds us that Moses had been a wanderer, a pilgrim, a sojourner in the land of Egypt and it reminds us of God's faithfulness to him there. Then when his son Eliezar's name is mentioned, he pauses and he says, "You know, I named him Eliezar because God had spared me." Eliezar means *God is help*. God is my help and this perhaps looks back to that incident where Moses had slain an Egyptian and Pharaoh had sought to kill him, and God in His mercy allowed Moses to escape Pharaoh's hand and sword. At any rate, Eliezar reminds us that God had been the help of Moses in Israel.

Then of course, fifthly, this passage records that Israel was now at the Mountain of God. They were at Mt. Sinai. Remember that God had promised all the way back in Exodus chapter two, that he was going to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt to worship at the mountain in which He would show them. So we are seeing the fulfillment here of God's promises and a testimony to God's faithfulness. Moses, as he writes these things, is pondering these proofs of the faithfulness of God. Perhaps this is the first chance that he's had to catch his breath and reflect. For ever since the children of Israel have left Egypt, it has been crisis after crisis, and now finally, with the family reunion that is occurring in verses 1 through 7, Moses has the opportunity to recall and look back and realize what God has done.

It reminds you a little bit of Luke doesn't it? In chapter 2 in verse 19, and wouldn't you have loved to have been there when Luke was interviewing Mary to find out these details that none of the other gospels tell us. He pauses and he says that after all these things happen to Mary and the birth of Jesus, that she treasured them up and pondered them in her heart. You can see Moses' mind pondering these proofs of God's faithfulness and remembering all that God had done for him and all that He had done for Israel. So in the very first section, in verses 1 through 7, we have an example of God's faithfulness recounted for us even in this family reunion.

II. Family conversation filled with the things of God: Gentile rejoicing over the God of Israel.

Then in verses 8 through 12 we have a beautiful spiritual conversation recorded for us. Moses initiates a talk with his father-in-law. His father-in-law was perhaps the chief priest of Midian. That phrase, *priest of Midian*, if you look at the parallel passage in I Samuel chapter 1 verse 9, probably indicated that he was the chief priest of the Midianites, yet Moses comes in to this chief priest of the Midianites and talks with him about things of the Lord. He indicated a conversation about what God had done and he gets a surprising response from Jethro. Especially in light of the attack of the Amalekites upon Israel, and especially in light of the fact that if you've read ahead in the story, in the Old Testament you know that the

Midianites and Israel did not get along. You are not expecting the high priest of the Midianites to bless God. You are not expecting the high priest of the Midianites to praise God for the redemption of Israel, but in verses 8 through 12 that is precisely what you get. This family conversation, filled with the things of God, serves to give us a display of a Gentile rejoicing over the redemption of the God of Israel.

I want to say just in passing that our family talk ought to be filled with the things of the Lord even as Moses' family talk was filled with the things of the Lord. It's one of the things that I'm most thankful to my parents for, that they taught us how to talk about God and the things of the Lord naturally and in the day to day conversation of life. It wasn't stilted; it didn't sound like spiritualizing; it was woven into the fabric of life; not just what we talked about on the Lord's day, at Sunday dinner, but it was woven into the fabric of life. You can see this here in Moses' conversation with his father-in-law.

In verse 8, the first thing that he does after inquiring about how his father-in-law is doing, you notice in verse 7, Moses bows down and then he kisses his father-in-law on the cheek. He is following the normal social customs. Then he immediately asks about how he is doing. The very next thing we are told in verse 8 is that Moses begins to recount to him these amazing things that the Lord had done, the deliverances that He had given .

The response of Jethro is surprising. He does two things. First, he rejoices, then he confesses that the Lord God of Israel is greater than all gods. He blesses the Lord that Moses and Israel had been delivered through Pharaoh in verse 10, and then he acknowledges that the Lord is greater than all gods.

We too ought to long for unbelievers to bless God, for in this incident we are seeing a fulfillment of what God had said and covenanted and promised to Abraham in Genesis 12 verse 2 and verse 3. Do you remember what God had said to Abraham? He said, "Abraham, you shall be a blessing and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So, we are seeing here an example of a Gentile family that blesses God and thus Moses and the children of Israel are a blessing to them. This is as God had intended it. God is fulfilling the promise that he made to Abraham.

It reminds us of Acts chapter 11 and Acts chapter 15 as the Apostles recount the Gentiles coming to faith and saying they come to faith in Jesus the Messiah as well. It reminds us of Jethro, showing greater faith and greater gratitude for the deliverances than Israel has heretofore. It reminds you of the centurion in Matthew chapter 8, verse 10, of whom Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel." Jethro the Gentile, the Midianite blesses God and confesses Him to be greater than all gods.

By the way, two things in detail I'd like to point out. Verse 11 is a strange verse.

Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods. Now the rest of the sentence is incomplete. Indeed it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people. Then there is nothing more. Maybe when I read it the first time you thought, well what's suppose to come after that? That's an incomplete sentence indicating that the thing that struck Jethro as Moses recounted how God delivered Israel is how God dealt with Egypt measure for measure. What had Pharaoh threatened to do to Israel? To drown their voice. And at the end of the story, what did Moses tell Jethro that God had done to Egypt? He had drowned the men of their army. At that point, Jethro said, God has dealt measure for measure with Egypt, and it clearly impressed him. It proved to him that God was greater than all gods because He had done to Egypt as Egypt had planned to do to Israel and thus had dealt with Egypt measure for measure.

The second thing I'd like to point out in passing, is verse 12. You may be wondering, "What in the world is a Midianite priest doing offering sacrifices." If you are a good Hebrew you are reaching for your sword about this time. You may be wondering what is all this sacrificing and meal sharing before the Lord. Well, verse 12 has all the marks of a covenant making ceremony. What we probably see here is a covenant being made between Israel and the Midianites. Some sort of a mutual peace treaty being established, because we're told in verse 12, they sit down and eat a meal, before the Lord. The closest parallel to it is in Joshua chapter 9. So, here we see in verses 1 through 7 the family reunion that focuses on the faithfulness of God, then in verses 8 through 12 the spiritual conversation which highlights the victory of the God of Israel over Egypt and over Pharaoh and the confession even of the Gentiles of this troop.

Finally as you look at verses 13 through 27, we see the establishment of a Jewish judicial system. Now, obviously this story tells us something about the delegation of responsibility and about the establishment of an efficient system of the administration of justice, but it also holds for us many surprises. For one thing, it is stunning that the origin of the Israelite judicial system is ascribed to the Midianites in light of the hostility between Israel and Midian in later history, Once again this could only be written because it happened. No Israelite would have made up a story about swiping the ideas for their judicial system from Midianites. They couldn't stand the Midianites. So, we see here another example of the truthfulness of the account.

Another surprising thing is that the origins of Israel's judicial system are not ascribed to God and His direct revelation and command. They are ascribed to Jethro. That says something about common grace and common sense. Of course, Jethro does say to Moses that he needs to go and see if this fits with God's command, but it's Jethro who suggests the plan and we know enough about Midian to know that this is basically the Midianite model for judicial administration. At any rate, there are two things that I want to emphasis in this passage.

First of all, look at verse 21. It is interesting that in Moses' selection of judges, and the word means 'judges' and 'leaders' like the word 'judges' is used in the Book of Judges. These aren't just judges who sit on the bench with robes and make deliverances, these are also leaders of the people and it's even translated that way in the New American Standard in this passage. It's a difficult word to translate into our setting. Notice that there are qualifications that involve both ability and morality. Look at verse 21. We are told that they are to be able men, they are to be men who fear God, they are to be men of truth and they are to be men who hate dishonest game. So they are not only to have the ability to make good judgments, but they are to have the morality to cause the legal system to be above reproach, so that it is seems that the rule of law is not partial, it's not contrived, it's not beholden to special interest groups that God's law is being administered. And so, once again we see the importance of having those with not only ability, but of morality in administrating the law of the land.

The second thing that I want to draw your attention to is simply this. In this passage it is emphasized that Moses' job is to primarily to declare the law and the will of the Lord to Israel. I want you to notice that God is not satisfied with merely declaring His word to His people. He wants a practical system, whereby that word can be implemented. The word is to be declared, but the word must also be implemented. The law must be established and announced, but the law must also be obeyed and upheld and applied. How are you going to do that? Moses can't do both jobs, but he cannot neglect the job of announcing the word of God, of declaring the law. So, a system must be established where by the law is implemented and established in the land. That is done in the series of judges. So we see God's concern, not only to give a wonderful law to Israel, but to establish a discipleship of that law in the land, whereby the law can actually be upheld and applied to specific situations.

It's the same in the church today. The Lord not only desires to see the law announced to His people, but practically worked out in their lives. He wants to see them disciplined in that truth so that the truth is not only known , but it is obeyed and honored amongst His people. Let's look to the Lord in prayer.

Our Lord and our God, we thank you for the richness of Your word. Instruct us by it, train us in it, build us up through it. We ask it in Jesus name, amen.

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